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Climate change and social work : steps to an eco-social work practice

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Climate Change and Social Work: Steps to an Eco-Social Work Practice

ABSTRACT

Although many professions and citizen groups are actively working to create practice models and policies that will help people adapt to climate change, the social work profession is not currently engaging with this issue. If the social work profession would join these other groups and create its own practice models based on meeting the physical, psychological, and social needs that result from climate change, then the core social work value of creating a just society and empowering underrepresented populations can be strengthened in climate change adaptation work. This qualitative, exploratory study asked eleven social workers what concerns they have for their clients or community with regards to adapting to a changing climate; what professional actions they would need to take to help with these concerns; what support they would need to successfully complete the action; and how this relates to justice. This sample population of this study formed two distinct groups: social workers who were highly involved in eco-activism over a long period of time; and the general sample. The highly engaged sample engaged in eco-activism outside of the clinical social worker setting and they reported the need for more community support and involvement. The general group worked in a variety of clinical settings and reported the need for more structural support in order to help clients adapt to climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOCIAL WORK:

STEPS TO AN ECO-SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

TABLE OF CONTENTS iii

LIST OF TABLES iv

CHAPTER

I INTRODUCTION 1

II LITERATURE REVIEW 4

III METHODOLOGY 17

IV FINDINGS 27

V DISCUSSION 63

REFERENCES 70

APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Human Subjects Review Committee Letter 75
Appendix B: Participant informed consent form 76
Appendix C: Interview Guide 78

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Social Workers Concerns for Clients/Communities 31

2. Actions that Social Workers can take to help Clients/Communities 42

3. Categories of Support 49

Chapter One

Introduction

The possibility that global climate change may be causing unpredictable and irreversible transformations in the earth's ecosystem is alarming social and economic policy makers at all levels. Local, national, and intergovernmental planning agencies/committees are investing considerable human and economic capital to prepare for a future on our changing planet (Hoff & Polack, 1993; MassDEP, 2010; Adger, 2007). A heightened sense of urgency is reflected as climate discussions shift from plans for *mitigation* to climate change *adaptation* (DiMento, 2007).

Does the social work profession want to be part of this global climate adaptation discussion? So far "the environmental crisis has remained largely outside of social work discourse" (Coates, 2005) even given that from its inception, social work has contextualized the human experience, emphasizing that intra-psychic phenomenon develops within a social milieu and physical space (McKinnon, 2008). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has an explicit environmental protection policy statement, "Social workers have a professional obligation to become knowledgeable and educated about the precarious position of the natural environment, to speak out and take action on behalf of it, and to help their clients act in an environmentally responsible manner" (NASW, 2006, p. 141). Even so, Shaw reported that only 10% of Californian social workers who responded to his study were aware that NASW has an environmental policy (Shaw, 2006).

Most of the current published literature on the intersection of social work practice and environmental activism reflects the viewpoint of theorists. This body of literature has failed to generate a vigorous debate about environmental issues within the social work community (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Coates, 2005; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lovell & Johnson, 1994; Marlow & Van Rooyen, 2001). In contrast this empirical study will focus on one specific environmental issue, adaptation to global climate change, and will record and analyze the thoughts and feelings of social work practitioners in the field. Also, the published empirical literature lacks significant inquiry into the field workers' conceptualization of climate justice. The theoretical literature is not making changes with field workers. Why? What is the barrier to inclusivity? Can field social workers bridge this barrier? Do field social workers care about climate change?

This explorative qualitative study will ask pro-environmentally positioned social workers: how they see climate change adaptation affecting their communities and/or clients; what resources and/or supports do they need to effectively meet any perceived challenges; and if they imagine that issues of climate justice may affect the clients and communities that they serve? In-person interviews will be used to gather to elicit a wide variety of opinions, aspirations, and concerns. The data analysis will look at: themes of concern; perceived blocks to progress; support systems needed; and concerns about climate justice.

I have been involved in ecological activism where I have observed many social workers doing climate change work outside of the scope of their professional practice. In these settings I have listened to their deep concerns and fears that our changing climate may make this planet uninhabitable for future generations. They have shared their frustrations about: structural policies; political blockades; inability to mobilize the masses; climate injustice; as well as

corporate practices that continually fail to protect our natural resources and place not only vulnerable populations, but all people, at risk.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

"*It depends who we call the client. In this time of ecological crisis we can no longer afford to view the client as merely the single person seated in front of us."*

Dr. Madeline Rugh, Eco-Art Therapist

Introduction to Literature Review

The handful of articles in the social work literature that argue for more involvement in the environmental moment has failed to generate vigorous debate in the social work community (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2005; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lovell & Johnson, 1994; Marlow & Van Rooyen, 2001; Mary, 2008). These articles list a myriad of ethical reasons that social work *should* consider the environment and possible actions steps to greater inclusion of the environment into social work practice. But there is no evidence of whether or not these actions are attempted or implemented. Neither is research described that would determine why social work continues to avoid engaging with environmental issues. This unidirectional communication pattern has not been an effective path to mobilize pro-environmental action toward climate change adaptation as being within the scope of social work. Are social workers concerned about climate change? Are they too busy attending to other personal and professional activities? Do they lack awareness and knowledge? Are there aspects of social work practice that overlap with environmentalism but don't get named environmental work? Why, in a field willing to face the challenges imposed by other large social issues such as poverty and racism, are social workers apparently reluctant to discuss how the *environmental*

crisis might effect vulnerable populations? This study is designed to see if social workers have concerns about effects of climate change on the populations that they work with.

The following literature review will move from concepts and theory to empirical data. It will include a discussion of the person-in-environment model (PIE); a description of the tensions between *the individual* and *the environment*; the use of the word environment in the PIE model; the expanded view of the environment in the PIE model proposed by contemporary eco-social work theorists based on the concept of *deep ecology* and *the new paradigm*.

I will note how there has been a failure to name ecological issues; a willingness to blame nature rather than political structures; and that this failure to name means that the profession of social work is not speaking up against climate injustice. Examining NASW's environmental policy statement will show that the social work profession itself has already determined that there is a case to be made for the involvement of social work in environmental issues. Two significant empirical studies of social workers attitudes towards including the environment in the scope of practice will be examined.

Some of the social work literature in this review discussed *environmental issues* of which *climate change adaptation* is a subset. This research study focused on how social workers perceive the needs of their clients as society adapts to the specific environmental challenges caused by climate change.

Person-In-Environment (PIE)

The PIE model.

Germain and Gitterman (1980) wrote the *Life Model for Social Work Practice,* which included the *person-in-environment* model (PIE). The viewpoint of this model is that individuals develop in relationship to others and their surroundings. Balancing the tension between

individual and collective practice models, Germain said, "Contemporary social work is characterized by two intellectual tendencies. One views human needs and problems as originating within the person; the other views them as generated by the social order" (p. 1).

The person-in-environment frame synthesizes the complex inter-dependency between individuals and the larger systems that they live in. "The ecological perspective presents our view that human needs and problems are generated by the transactions between people and their environments" (Germain & Gitterman, 1980, p. 1). Eco-social work theorist, and founder of The Global Alliance for Deep Ecological Social Work, Fred Besthorn notes that although PIE has attempted to bridge the gap between the personal and society, on a practice the social work profession has experienced a tension between meeting individual vs. collective needs (Besthorn, 2000). A qualitative study of 35 social workers showed that clinicians general favored the intra-psychic outlook over taking a systemic approach and that they rarely balanced the two approaches (Buchbinder, Eiaskovits, Karnieli-Miller, 2004).

Tension between *social* and *natural* environments.

In general practice, the social work profession has emphasized the *social* rather than *natural* environment, even though Germain stated that, "Obviously, the breadth and depth of the physical environment as a setting for human behavior and development is extraordinary. To ignore it in one's calculations for helping clients may be a major mistake" (Germain & Bloom, 1999, p. 32).

The words *ecology* and *environment* have a range of meanings. These multiple meanings can cause confusion because the term can refer to the: natural world; social context; or system thinking. In this quote Germain used ecology to emphasize mutual interrelatedness:

> Ecology seeks to understand the reciprocal relationship between organism and environments. For social work, ecology appears to be a more useful metaphor than the older, medical-disease metaphor that tended to view human beings and environments as relatively separate entities and to reflect the linearity of time, space, and causality characteristic of the scientific method before and during the early part of the twentieth century. (Germain, 1980, p. 28)

And in this example she drew no distinction between physical and social environments. "The ecological perspective provides an adaptive, evolutionary view of human beings in constant interchange with all aspects of their environment" (Germain, 1980, p. 28). But here she is specific. "Physical environments become polluted by man's release of non-biodegradable matter produced by his technology" (Germain, 1980, p. 5). Further more, within the *physical environment* Germain (1980) distinguished the *natural environment* from the *built environment*.

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, Kemp developed a PIE assessment tool. This assessment includes both strengths and stressors of the physical environment such as: "access to recreational facilities", "sanitation", and "safe and healthful work conditions" (Kemp, 1997, p. 99). Kemp reports that "Though social workers frequently work with victims of environmental hazards …. our assessment tools rarely do justice to their impact. Consequently, many social workers are unaware or ill informed about these and other environmental hazards" (Kemp, 1997, pp. 99-100). Not only does this assessment scan for positive uses of nature, such as pleasure, recreation and growth and challenges presented by environmental toxins, it also include environmental self-determination and the individual's decision making capacity in terms of environmental exposure (Kemp, 1997, p. 104). The inclusivity of assessing the level of

empowerment in decision-making is a key consideration in the environmental justice movement. Even with an extensive assessment of the environment, this assessment tool emphasizes negative aspects related to the environment, such pollution, asbestos, and radiation poisoning (Kemp, 1997, p. 99).

This tendency to link *natural environments* to negative frames is explored by Park and Miller (2006) using discourse analysis on the use of the term *natural disaster* in the reporting of destruction in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. By placing the blame for destruction on a *natural disaster,* rather than inequitable social policies such as the development of evacuation plans based on car ownership, the destruction that occurred from the hurricane was interpreted as a single value-free event. By implying that *nature* is the enemy, public dialog minimized the history of human-made social inequality in New Orleans.

Current eco-social work theorists respond to PIE.

Deep Ecology

Current social work theorists who are calling for social worker engagement with the environmental crisis are asking: where is the *natural world* in the *person-in-environment* model (Besthorn, 2003; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Norton, 2009; Zapf, 2010)? Using a holistic approach, Germain defined the *ecological perspective* as the integration of humans with the natural world which is needed to counter-act the "anthropocentric orientation that place human beings at the center of the universe … Western culture led to the interest in mastering the forces of nature" (Germain, 1980, 3). Her words are echoed in the *deep ecology* philosophy, which is based on recognizing the inter-dependency between people and the physical ecosystem that they inhabit (Ungar, 2002). Proponents of the *deep ecology* practice call for a relational model between people and nature. Calling for a fundamental shift in consciousness from human-centered to

earth-centered they state that long lasting changes in human behavior towards the natural world the action must be grounded in philosophy. Besthorn (2003) calls for a spiritual social work practice so connected with the natural world that all aspects of social work happen within a frame that considers nature.

The deep ecology viewpoint does not specifically address how a social worker who adheres to deep ecology philosophy would meet the needs of clients who are experiencing poverty or abuse. Deep ecological thinking compares the oppression of people to the abuse of nature. Although Besthorn (2003) does present a series of earth-consciousness raising exercises to help people get in touch with their relationship to the material world, this model does not appear comprehensive or powerful enough to make a substantial radically shift in human consciousness. Because it does not present a systems-based approach to achieving this shift in consciousness, it appears to place the responsibility for creating change on the individual.

The new paradigm.

A shift in awareness is also called for by social work theorists who are proponents of the *new paradigm* model, which critiques modern political systems and calls for the social work profession to respond to "the causes of ecological destruction and social injustice" (Coates, 2003; Mary, 2008). The *new paradigm* criticizes modern industrialized society for failing to protect natural resources by abdicating environmental responsibility to multi-national corporations and governments without sufficient oversight (Coates, 2003). Rust (2004) also calls for her frustration at how slowly individual change is taking place at a time when there is "the urgency to create a sustainable society for future generations of human – indeed for all life on this planet" (Rust, 2004, p. 50).

Similar to the *deep ecology* frame, the *new paradigm* blames "industrialization, science and psychoanalysis" (Weick, 1981) for overemphasizing the individual over the collective functioning. In parallel fashion, clinical social work has emphasized individual treatment to the detriment of social action. Although, social work says that it attends to the person-in-environment, but most practice is geared to individuals. "Attention continued to be paid to the broad social structures that impinge on people's lives, but there seemed to be no practical way to incorporate this knowledge" (Weick, 1981).

The practical use of the PIE model in social work is that it offers a larger view of individual development and functioning. Individuals are less stigmatized when external influences are considered. It the practical aspects of treatment, in which PIE has gotten stuck. Although a person has developed in relationship to certain influences, most practice is based on returning the individual to a level where he/she can function and return to the social/natural conditions from which they came. Most social work practice does not attempt to change these conditions, even if they are not optimal for the individual, the collective, or the group.

In summary, PIE holds tension between the individual and the collective. Usually treatment for the individual is privileged. And when the collective is considered, usually the social structures are considered over the natural environment. In short, the social work profession generally lacks practices to address the natural environment. Even so, the profession does address environmental responsibility as an ethical issue.

NASW's environmental statement.

The National Association of Social Work (NASW), the largest professional social work organization in the United States, has an Environmental Policy statement that says the “unique position [of social work is] to influence the distribution of resources and to participate in efforts

to protect the environment" (NASW, 2006, p. 140). This statement also names "environmental discrimination" such as the clustering of waste disposal and toxic industry in poor communities and communities of color (Coates, 2003, p. 127). But even with a strong policy, currently the *environment* is not listed as one of NASW's Advocacy "Hot Issues" (NASW Advocacy, 2011). A recent study of members of NASW of California found that less than 11% of the respondents were aware that NASW had an environmental policy (Shaw, 2011, p. 13).

The social work profession's value towards issues of oppression and vulnerability are reflected the NASW Environmental Policy towards the rights of all people to "a fair share of the Earth's resources, including a clean environment" (NASW Environmental Policy, 2011). "There are many areas of convergence among social and ecological problems" (Hoff & Polack, 1993, p. 205). Mary calls on the social work profession to combine micro and macro practice. She notes that although the social work core values are "service, social justice, dignity, and worth of the person" (2008, p. 159) only four of NASW's fifty-one standards address macro level changes. Structural and critical social work can be tools to examine oppression among groups in society and seek change in the structure of society in order to create a more just world. These views need to be widened to address issues of sustainability and environmental justice (Mary, 2008).

Environmental and Climate Justice

The environmental justice movement came into being in response to a 1982 dumping of toxic waste in North Carolina. Later Bullard studied the relationship between the placement of incinerators and toxic dumps, which revealed that toxic sites tended to be clustered in poor neighborhoods and in areas where people of color live (Coates, 2003, p 127). Social work should be involvement in the environmental justice movement because the fair distribution of material

goods and healthy living conditions is a basic social work value (Hoff & Polack, 1993; Coates, 2003; Hawkins, 2010).

Climate justice grew out of the environmental justice movement and focuses on the disparity between the wealthy and the poor in adapting to climate change. Not only have the wealthy reaped more benefit from the activities that have caused pollution, but also "the hazards of climate change are truly global, worsening existing inequalities in terms of who caused and suffers from the problem, and who has the resources to cope with its mounting impacts" (Mohai, 2009).

Social workers can apply the skills they developed working for on justice issues such as civil rights and urban housing to the practice and conceptualization of climate justice (Park & Miller, 2006). Social workers can help strengthen the self-determination of people who are affected by climate change and work in accordance with The Principles of Climate Justice to "affirm the rights of indigenous peoples to represent and speak for themselves" (Bali, 2002).

Empirical Studies on Social Worker Attitudes about the Environment

Moving from theory to evidence, this section will describe three studies that generated empirical data about social worker's attitudes towards the intersection of environment and social work practice (McKinnon, 2008; Marlow & Van Rooyen, 2001; Shaw, 2006). McKinnon (2008) reported that in a 2001 poll of Australian social workers, only 11% listed "ecological sustainability" as a priority issue (p. 258). Marlow carried out a cross-continental survey in New Mexico, USA and KwaZula Natal, South African, on how social workers include the natural environment in practice and asked what obstacles limit them from including more environmental work in practice. Shaw (2006) gathered both quantitative and qualitative information about the environmental attitudes of social workers who were members of NASW of California.

Both Marlow (2001) and Shaw (2006) assumed that the people who took the time to respond to their surveys were more inclined to be pro-environmental than the other social workers in their sampling population. Both studies used NASW membership lists to define their sampling frame, Marlow in New Mexico and Shaw in California. Neither author addresses possible sampling selection bias in their studies by looking at the different attitudes and demographics between NASW members and non-members.

Shaw's doctoral dissertation, published in 2006, was a cross-sectional, empirical study of Californian social worker's environmental attitudes and knowledge base. His mixed-methods, random sample of 1000 NASW of California members had a 38percent return rate. His measurement instrument was the *New Environmental Paradigm Scale*, NEP, developed by Dunlap and van Liere. The NEP consists of a series of scaled questions about respondent attitudes such at, "The balance of nature is very delicate and easily upset" and "Humankind was created to rule over the rest of nature." In this study, social workers were also asked if they were aware that NASW has an environmental policy. Shaw reports that less than 11percent of the study's respondents were aware that NASW had an environmental policy. Shaw hoped that his findings would further the discussion between environmental justice and social work (Shaw, 2006).

In addition to the quantitative data, Shaw (2006) sampled fourteen participants to elicit qualitative data. From this investigation, he received wide ranging responses from social workers who reported that they did not include issues of the environment in their practice, to others who lead wilderness therapy for at-risk-youth and discuss pollutants with older clients. He found little evidence that environmental issues were covered in academic social work courses, although many respondents wished that environmental topics had been discussed. The majority of the

respondents reported a connection between social justice and the environment, stating that poverty and urban degradation cause this disparity. When asked if "social work has a role in affecting environmental change," Shaw reported that the respondents did not feel empowered to help clients and/or communities move towards green practices or face environmental challenges. Some respondents bemoaned the move from community-based work to private practice. Shaw sums up the need for social work to "derive a coherent vision" before a "call to action" moves forward (Shaw, 2006).

Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) conducted an empirical survey of social worker's attitudes about inclusivity of environmental issues. This exploratory study was conducted at two sites, one in New Mexico, USA and KwaZula Natal, South Africa. This article was published in 2001, but the authors did not mention when the data was collected. Using two sites provided insight into response differences between social workers in industrial vs. developing countries as well as across cultural values and different experiences. The populations of both sites were similar in that they had both high levels of poverty and cultural diversity (p. 244). The survey yielded 113 responses with a return rate of 27.4% from New Mexico and 26 percent from KwaZulu Natal. The environment was listed as personally important to 92 percent of all respondents; 72 percent reported that they believed that environmental issues were important to social work; and 45 percent said that they incorporated environmental issues into their practice. Social workers from KwaZulu incorporated a larger amount of community action (e.g. teaching students about eco-stewardship) whereas social workers from New Mexico practiced more mindfulness techniques and used nature for stress relief (e.g. visualizing nature scenes or suggesting that clients go on hikes). Obstacles to more involvement with ecological practice included: large workloads (38%); insufficient training (37%); time constraints (36%); and

insufficient resources (31%). The low response rate to the survey may have indicated that social workers that place value on the environment in social work responded at a higher rate than social workers in general.

Although both Shaw (2006) and Marlow (2001) found social workers that are interested in implementing the NASW environmental policy, they also reported a sense of despair and obstacles towards increasing eco-social work activity. Neither of these studies used triangulation. It is possible that other professionals who are working of environmental issues can envision a role for the social work profession in policy, practice and the current climate change adaptation planning.

Synopsis of the Literature

This literature review examined how social work has contextualized individual development and functioning through the person-in-environment frame. The scope of the concept *environment* can be narrowed to mean the social environment or widened to consider the *natural environment* as well. Current social work emphasizes the *social environment*. Although the social environment is generally assessed in order to better understand an individual, social work practice is focused on creating change in the individual, so that he/she can adapt to the larger society rather than changing the larger society, to better support the individual.

Two current eco-social work theories were examined. One is based on a *deep ecology* frame and includes the spiritual connection between people and the natural environment. This frame implies that when people make a shift in consciousness to understand that they are intimately connected to nature, then they will act to protect it. This model states that attempts to change behavior without changing consciousness will not result in long lasting changes. The other current eco-social work model that was examined is called the *new paradigm.* This model

takes a critical look at the structure of power and use of materials in industrial societies. It draws parallels between the oppression of people and abuse of natural resources. Neither model appears to have developed and implemented practical social work methodology or a body of empirical research to examine how their concepts are resonating in the field.

Then this review examined NASW's environmental policy, which makes a case for the inclusion of environmental issues as being within the scope of social work. This was followed by a brief introduction to the concept of climate justice, which speaks both to the fair use of materials, access to clean resources, as well as access to decision making about resource allocation and concerns about resiliency of vulnerable populations to adapt to challenges imposed by climate change.

The three empirical studies showed that social workers are as eco-friendly as the rest of the population. But that they generally not aware of NASW's policy and do not feel empowered to effectively work on environmental issues.

This study differed from previous studies in the following ways: it focused on climate change adaptation, rather than environmental problems in general; the information that was gathered reflected the lived experience of practicing social workers in an attempt to indirectly understand how they envision the intersection of climate change and social work practice. It was similar to previous studies because it also inquired about social workers sense of empowerment to make change and attitudes towards climate justice.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Study Purpose and Question

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to see if social workers can see a connection between climate change adaptation and social work practice. Most of the published literature on eco-social work is theoretical. In contrast this empirical study looks at the connections envisioned by social work practitioners in the field. The research question for this exploratory, qualitative study asked how social workers imagine that changes in climate may affect their communities and/or clients and what resources and/or supports would they need to effectively help meet these perceived challenges?

Research Method and Design

Rationale for research design selection.

An exploratory approach was used because there is a shortage of information on this topic. It is possible that the results of this study can be used as possible leads for further studies that have specific hypothesis. Qualitative methodology was used to obtain the richly contextualized personal thoughts and feelings of the participants. Narrative data was obtained through guided, semi-structured, individual interviews in order to catch a wide variety of opinions. Of particular note were the ways that ecologically informed behavior and feelings were consistent between the social worker's personal and professional lives.

Instrument design.

Some relevant assumptions that I brought to this study were that most social workers: are aware of the current contentious environmental discourse in society at large; are generally concerned with the physical, social and emotional health of vulnerable people; and may have specific and strong affective responses to the possibility of pain and suffering that may come from a shift in global climates which may cause unpredicted changes in local ecosystems. I also assumed that most social workers do not currently view their work as being related to the natural environment. By asking participants to bridge these two concepts, I was working at the interface of a socially constructed barrier between environmental activism and practical social work practice. One reason for doing this study was to see if social workers are able to deconstruct this assumed barrier and if so, what might this interface look like?

I believe that the environmental movement has been marginalized since Rachel Carson began to speak out about DDT. I have observed the field of social work stand up to injustices in race, class, and gender but ineffectively address environmental degradation, even when studies show that the effects of environmental degradation disproportionately affect people of color, elders, women, and the poor.

I used a semi-structured approach to allow participants to develop and express their ideas in detail. I used open-ended questions to clarify information and to probe for more data. The interview guide created a framework for the discussion.

The flow of the interview was purposeful and focused on the following themes: current personal actions; concerns for others; professional actions; support needed; fairness and justice; ways to move forward; and feedback about the study. During the interviews I asked about both *clients* and *communities* in order to include a wide variety of social work settings. To simplify

the following explanation of the interview instrument, I will only refer to *clients*. I offer insight into both the manifest and latent information that I was trying to access through the questions.

Question one: What actions, on a personal or professional level, do you currently take in order to help the environment or to prepare for climate change?

I asked about specific personal behavior because I assumed that it is easier to move a person who already takes action to a level of taking more action. The answers to this question gave information about the participant's level of environmental engagement and her knowledge base. And it helped determine if the participants personal pro-environmental behavior was in agreement with their profession pro-environmental behavior.

Question two: In what ways do you imagine that a changing climate could affect your community or client?

This was a complex question and formed the core of the interview. The manifest content was to generate a range of possible concerns from the aggregate sample. Also, by asking the social worker to focus on the needs of her clients, I encouraged the social worker to think altruistically, which I hoped would help them transcend personal concerns.

The latent content behind this question was to set up an *exception question*. Viewing the lacking of ecological content in social work practice as a socially constructed barrier, if participants can imagine even a single way to bridge this barrier, then the barrier has become porous and no longer an absolute truth.

Question three: What actions would you like to take, as a professional social worker, towards helping your clients or community, adapt to the changes that concern you about our changing climate?

The actions that participants reported built a foundation for practical eco-social work. Also, I was interested in seeing if there are current social work practices that overlap with climate change adaption but not currently labeled as climate change work.

Question four: What support would you need in order to take such action?

This question gathered information about both the social worker's sense of empowerment towards taking action and indirectly looked at the role of current leadership. For example, if a social worker would like to be taking action but believes that she needs the support of agency administration, then future eco-social work activism could focus on making changes on an administrative level.

Question five: How do you imaging that climate justice affects your clients or community?

Social work has a long commitment to values and principles of social justice. This question was designed to measure social workers views that climate change adaptation should be seen as an issue of fairness. I was interested in listening for two different aspects of justice. First, issues related to the inverse relationship between consumption and exposure to environmental challenges and second, the lack of representation in the decision making by vulnerable populations.

Question six: What is your level of hope, empowerment, and resiliency?

This question was designed to see how the participant's level of engagement in climate change work correlated with their sense of hope. By the time that this question was asked, the participants had been speaking for 20 to 30 minutes. The answers to this question were more personal; less intellectualized; and generated more affective responses.

Question seven: How would you like to see the field of social work intersect with environmental issues?

The participant's answers to this question expanded the scope of conversation beyond the initial concerns discussed in *Question two* and allowed the participants to imagine the scope of eco-social work beyond the needs of their own clients.

Question eight: Is there anything else that you wished I had asked in this interview?

The answers to this question gave me feedback on how the participants had experienced the interview process. It allowed them to tell me if they had brought a different set of assumptions to the interview or if the interview had disappointed them.

Sample

Selection criteria (inclusion/exclusion).

The inclusion criteria for this study was that participants must: hold a social work degree (bachelors, masters or doctoral level); live or work in the northeastern US; believe that human activity is one of the factors that is affecting global climate change; and self-define as currently engaging in some type of pro-environmental behavior, which included recycling at home. People who do not believe that there is an anthropogenic cause for climate change were excluded in order to build a more consistent sample. It is possible that there are people who do not believe human activity is affecting climate change but engage in pro-environmental behaviors for other reasons, such as concerns about effects of pollution, but they were not included in this study for a more consistent sample population. As well, because translation services were not available for this study, respondents were required to be English speakers.

Representativeness of sample.

Snowball sampling, a non-probabilistic method was used to generate the sample. This sampling method allowed me to generate a small group of social workers who are highly engaged in climate change activism.

Diversity of sample.

Although I did considerable outreach in order to attract research subjects from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, in the end, ten of my research subjects were Caucasian and one was Latina. My outreach effort included contacting thirty-five individuals who were affiliated with environmental justice organizations and seventeen specifically to people at environmental justice groups that are affiliated with specific ethnic populations, such as the National Black Environmental Justice Network. From these unsolicited e-mails, I received only one reply from a social worker who was interested in participating in the study. Unfortunately he did not meet the inclusion criteria because he did not believe that human activity is adding to climate change.

Data Collection Methods

Nature of the study.

Data was gathered from recorded one-hour in-person interviews that took place in public settings, such as cafes, or in the social workers home, depending on the participant's preference. Nine of interviews took place in the Boston metropolitan area and two took place in Connecticut. All participants allowed me to audio-record their interview. A digital audio recorder was the recording device. I transcribed all of the interviews. I also took memo notes about how the setting affected the interview.

Methodological bias.

Researcher bias.

My personal bias towards the importance of climate change as a social issue, certainly affected this study. One participant commented that she felt I was implying that consequences of climate change would be negative. I did not expect to achieve a sample of highly engaged participants. I expected that I would interview more people with the characteristics of the general sample.

Selection bias.

Snowball sampling leads to bias in the sample. Since I was not trying to prove a hypothesis, but instead seeing if it was possible for any social workers to make a connection between climate change and social work practice, selection bias was not a concern in this study. And for this descriptive study, snowball sampling allowed me to generate a sample of *highly engaged* social workers, because one eco-activist recommended another eco-activist.

Risks of Participation

Participants were warned that they might become upset or anxious talking about climate change and potential ecological devastation. Individuals who believe that they are not doing enough to help the environment may feel guilty. We discussed that any such feelings would most likely be momentary rather than lingering reactions.

Benefits of Participation

The opportunity to share personal experiences also brought possible benefits. It was possible that participants could experience relief by sharing their concerns. Similarly they could feel empowered because their ideas were being used in a research study that has the potential to help environmental activism.

Informed Consent Procedures

The Informed Consent process was discussed and signed before demographic data was collected and the interview took place. The Informed Consent form can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

I used content analysis to discover manifest and latent themes, patterns, and meanings embedded in the interview data. Because of the exploratory position of this study and scarcity of previous empirical data on the intersection of social work and environmentalism, I was searching for a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

Open coding was used to determine the "code categories through close examination of the text" (Rubin, 2007, p. 305). Code categories were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and then the complete data set was examined for inclusivity of the codes. Both manual and simple computer methods, such as the search function, were used to create the table of coding themes and quotes. An iterative process was used to generate coding themes. First, each interview was analyzed for its *dominant narratives or concerns*. This list of concerns was used as a composite list and counted across all respondents and organized into major categories of: physical, mental health, and other concerns. A similar coding chart was created for: actions that participants could envision taking; supports needed; and issues of fairness. Some of the participants limited their discussion to a single topic such as food availability. While other participants listed a range of concerns such as: sea level rise, heat waves, other weather affects, affordable energy and emerging diseases.

One category of latent content that was coded was a comparison of private vs. professional pro-ecological behaviors. Each interview was screened for conceptual barriers to inclusivity of eco-social work themes in a category that I called: the *inability to name.* One

example of this *inability to name* is when a social worker herself feels anxious about climate change, but does not see how climate change adaptation can have any effect on the mental health of her client. Also, since a large portion of the theoretical eco-social work literature focused on the human/nature interaction, each interview was analyzed for references to deep ecological theory in order to see if these concepts are in the participant's awareness.

Affective information was analyzed by coding feeling words in the data. These feeling words were counted across participants and grouped into the following categories: anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, pessimism, and positive feelings.

Discussion of Methodology

Relevance to social work practice, policy, and education.

Ultimately, understanding the aspirations and perceived agency of social workers to affect human services needs with respect to climate change adaptation can inform activists, educators, policy makers and researchers on effective paths of increasing social workers awareness about ways that issues of climate change can intersect with social work practice. This can help create action paths so that social workers can be more involved in helping people adjust to a changing world.

Generalizability of the results.

Not only are these results not generalizable but also, since the data represents opinions, any information gathered is localized to time and place. I was interested in finding out how the participants conceptualized possible effect of climate change on a local level especially the effects that may affect the population they work with.

Study's limitations.

The methodological approach of this study was suited to derive exploratory, descriptive data. Further research is necessary to determine best practice methods to increase ecological awareness within the scope of social work practice.

Statement of personal perspective.

I hope that the results of this study can be used to inform ecologically motivated social workers of some possible approaches to integrating climate change adaptation into practical social work through future policy, education, and advocacy.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore if social workers could envision taking a proactive helping role to help their clients and communities face any physical, mental and economic challenges that may be encountered as the climate changes. Although social work energetically addresses complex societal problems such as oppression, violence, and inequity, there is little research on how issues related to climate change are being considered by practicing social workers. The majority of the social work literature that discusses social work and the natural world focuses on theoretical issues. This study adds to the literature because it describes the thoughts and feelings of social workers in the northeast U.S.

The data presented in this chapter was gathered from eleven semi-structured interviews to determine: how social workers imagine that their clients/community might encounter challenges resulting from changes in the climate; specific actions they believe they would need to take to help meet the needs that they identified; supports they would need to successfully help meet these challenges; and how they believe race, ethnicity, and/or socio-economic status could affect the impact of and resiliency to the challenges imposed by climate change.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample Population

Eleven social workers were interviewed for this study. All were female between the ages of 29 to 80 years old. Two participants were younger than 40 and the remaining nine were 60 to 80 years old. The mean age was 62.9 years old. Ten of the participants identified as white and one as Latina. All participants held master degrees in social work and one participant specialized in policy.

All of the participants were currently engaged in some degree of social work either full-time, part-time, or as volunteers. Four of the participants are semi-retired and have very limited private practices or do volunteer work in their church communities. The variety of practice settings for this sample included: social service agencies; private practice; government; religious organizations; and schools. The practice issues at the work settings included: homeless women and children; sexual abuse; general mental health, including depression and anxiety; infertility and adoption; elders and aging; urban youth, single parents, and families; poverty; substance abuse; sustainability and environmental protection; and community development.

Participants' Level of Engagement with Climate Change Issues

An inclusion requirement for this study was that participants believe human behavior is a cause of global climate change. This was required because this study is concerned about the motivation and level of empowerment that social workers have to initiate change. People who do not believe that global climate change is occurring, or that it is purely a natural process, may not be motivated to take action to help clients and communities adapt to climate change. It was also required that the participants take part in some sort of pro-environmental action. This was required because the participant was being asked about actions that they would help clients take

and it was assumed that people who already show that they are willing to take an action, even a small one, would be more open to helping their clients take actions as well.

The sample was further categorized into two groups depending on their participation in climate change and environmental activism. These two groups will be called the *general sample* and those who are *highly engaged* in the subject of climate change. Six participants were in the *general sample* and five participants were in the *highly engaged sample.* The age range of the *general sample* was from 29 to 80 years old with a mean of 57.2 and the age range of the *highly engaged sample* was from 60 to 78 years old with a mean of 69.8. These groups were quite distinct and easy to categorize. All participants were concerned about the environment and energy efficiency and performed activities such as: recycling; eating, buying or growing local/organic food; or driving hybrid cars. The pro-ecological activities of the *highly engaged* individuals also included: representing communities at national or international climate policy conferences; decades of community organizing and teaching about environmental issues; living in intentional communities; and one participant was a family member of a prominent climate scientist.

Another distinction between the two groups is that all of the participants in the general sample worked either in private practice or through an agency with special populations such as the homeless, elders, or families dealing with issues of infertility. Contrarily, in the highly engaged sample, only one social worker worked in private practice on a part-time basis, and the others held jobs working for municipalities or volunteering at their churches, but not direct clinical work.

Concerns that Workers have for their Clients/Community as the Climate Changes

Range of concerns.

The participants were asked to explain how they imagine that a changing climate can affect the needs of their community or clients. Both community and clients were included to allow a broad range of social worker activity from individual clinical work, community activism, and community development.

During the interviews, some participants spoke about a single issue of concern such as access to food, while others described a cluster of concerns. The number of concerns raised in an individual interview was 0.0 to 6.0. The mean number of concerns was 2.9, with the highly engaged sample having a mean of 4.0 concerns and the general sample having a mean of 2.0 concerns. It would be expected that the more highly engaged participants would have a higher number of concerns because they most likely spend more time thinking about climate change issues and are generally more educated on the topic of climate change adaptation. Table 1 compares the quantity and spectrum of concerns between the general sample and the highly engaged sample.

Table 1

Social Workers Concerns for Clients/Communities

Concern	*General Sample* (n = 6)	*Highly Engaged Sample* (n = 5)
Resource Availability		
Food	2	4
Water	1	2
Health		
Disease/Asthma	2	4
Heat Stroke	1	3
Mental Health	1	1
Weather		
Unpredictable	1	3
Flooding/Sea Level Rise	2	4
Extreme Storms	2	5
Other Concerns		
Environmental/Economic Collapse	2	5
Jobs are more important	2	1
Clients have more pressing issues	4	1
Community Engagement	1	4

To demonstrate the range of concerns between participants, one highly engaged participant listed multiple concerns in one sentence. "Well if we really see the sea level rise that they are talking about it is going to affect housing stock. But more specifically, more closely, I'm worried about weather effects, heat waves, energy loss, people not having enough heat, maybe food, jobs, just that – and health." While one participant who was not concerned that climate change would bring challenges to her clients, and may even make life easier if the local climate were to become milder, said, "In [the Northeast] we have had warmer [weather] and our climate will probably become more on the order of North Carolina or Virginia [rather] than [the Northeast]. But I don't think that it will change much. …. And primarily [my clients] will just think that they can save a little money on fuel."

Physical concerns made up the majority of the concerns discussed during the interviews. Other issues of concern were for the mental health of their clients and communities. Some participant saw other non-climate related concerns such as economic hardship and difficulties with day-to-day living as being more important to their clients than climate change adaptation. For some participants, the complexity and quantity of concerns increased as the interview progressed and they developed their thought about the topic. Others kept their thoughts focused on one or two concerns throughout the interview.

Physical concerns.

The range of physical concerns that the social workers had for their clients or communities involved: weather changes such as extreme storms and temperatures; sea level rise; health effects such as respiratory disease and heat stroke; mental health stress; insufficient availability of resources such as food and water; and environmental degradation from animal extinction to total ecosystem collapse.

Weather changes.

Weather issues were of concern for seven of the participants. All five of the highly engaged participants were concerned about weather events, but only two of the six other participants expressed concerns about weather. The weather issues of concern were: unpredictability in weather; flooding and sea level rise; extreme weather such as torrential rain, blizzards and drought; and more extreme temperatures such as hotter summers and colder winters.

One social worker was familiar with projections about future flooding in her municipality because as a municipal employee she regularly attends planning meetings that include discussions about the capacity of the city's infrastructure, such as sewer pipes, to meet the

expected increase in rain during more intense storms. She expressed concern about effects of storms. "Physically the water issues are going to be huge here between heavy rainfall and storm surges."

Another social worker expressed concern over possible effects of temperature changes. "I think that extreme weather is definitely going to have an effect, especially because of the political situation – cold weather will affect people because they won't be able to heat their houses. If we have an extreme heat wave in the summer they won't be able to use air conditioning and they might die – there might be an increase in mortality as a consequence." Her reference to "the political situation" was about the decreases in social service funding for the poor so that people with less income will have less ability to control the temperature in their homes. She was aware that in recent years there has been an increase in heat wave related deaths worldwide.

And another social worker appeared anxious about unpredictability she is noticing in the weather. "So one thing that concerns [me that is] connected to the environment [is] the weather changes – the fact that we don't know any more when it is winter or fall. And that is kind of scary when you see the wrong weather at the wrong time. You begin to feel the reality. Like things are really changing and it's not for the best." Specifically she was referring to cold spells in Florida that had recently ruined her winter vacation and for the first time had required her relatives in the south to need warmer winter coats.

Resource availability.

Another concern that seven of the eleven participants had was the impact that the weather can have on access to food and water. One social worker who works with homeless families was concerned about food accessibility. She said, "What [comes] to mind is the fact that food prices

are going up so high because of climate change – because there are floods in some places. Well the price of everything is going up and that affects what people can afford to buy, so in terms of thinking about, well their food stamps only cover a certain amount, so [I'm concerned about] trying to help them make that go further but still eating in a healthy way."

Two social workers mentioned that reduced access to drinking water might be an effect that climate change could have on their clients. One social worker said, "Water accessibility [comes] to mind." Another highly engaged social worker who works both locally and internationally spoke about "short term and long term effects" on water accessibility. She sees "a range of things. For some people the climate has been very changed and caused a significant amount of hardship – either draught or the opposite – more intense rains."

Health effects.

Besides weather and resources, eight participants stated concerns about health effects such as: asthma and other respiratory illness; disease migration to areas due to different climactic opportunities; and health effects on populations due to heat intolerance.

One geriatric social worker, who would like to see greater cooperation between social work and public health, was concerned about respiratory illness as well as heat. She said, "Well, [I think] about my elderly population, or urban elderly. I know in the summer they get really hot and in their small apartments they might not have air conditioning. So I think about their health. I think about respiratory problems and people not being able to get out. That's the main thing." Another highly engaged participant expressed concern about the elderly, "Poor older people need to be protected from the extreme [weather]."

One highly engaged social worker was concerned with many environmental problems as well as issues of water and air pollution. In terms of health she mentioned respiratory difficulties,

"I think [some people's] health could be impacted by climate things like air pollution. There [can be] difficulties for people who have asthma or COPD."

One participant who administers an urban anti-poverty agency does not directly see adverse health effects but hears about her community's difficulty with urban air quality said, "In [my social work] role, when I go to community meetings, I hear about [problems with asthma] through the hospital connections that we have, through people doing studies about it, and community forums talking about health and asthma and the environment…. When new buildings are built – [there are] studies of the air quality – and it always comes out that the things being done around here are directly affecting the residents because there is non-stop construction [in this city]."

Mental health concerns.

Although many of the social workers themselves expressed personal feelings of anger, fear, or despair over the state of the environment, only three participants spoke of psychological stress as a concern for their clients or community. One highly engaged participant who has been involved with environmental activism for decades says that although she is worried about the state of the environment and finds the current rise in greenhouse gases distressing, she is motivated to help people cope by addressing their "physical, emotional and mental [needs]." She does this by educating and encouraging others to take action, "I find that it is extremely important to let people know that they can do something to make a difference, even if it is a little something. It makes them feel empowered and less hopeless and less despairing. So I think that is important."

Another semi-retired social worker imagined that coping with any physical hardships brought on by climate change could increase the emotional stress on her already stressed clients.

She imagined that her clients might respond in the following manner, "Many of them would look at it as a crisis, sort of a personal crisis, just one more stress to deal with. Those with a sense of humor would look at it as one more assault on their ability to cope, but with tongue in cheek."

Another highly engaged participant said, "In my personal life I am really interested in helping people deal with the emotional side of the whole thing." She is involved in eco-activism work that helps people stay emotionally connected to environmental issues, "I see that the whole society is in denial – even I'm in denial most of the time, but you kind of have to be in some ways. But until we begin to have ways for us to really grapple with the enormity of what is happening obviously we won't be able to handle it. I feel that is a key thing."

Conversely, a participant who saw climate change problems as a very distant problem that will be solved through political leadership and scientific advancement appeared to believe that eco-activists suffer from anxiety. She said, "Those people who are worried about the world usually have an anxiety disorder." This participant was much more concerned about her clients' economic hardships.

Other concerns for clients or communities.

Economic.

In many interviews, economic difficulties were seen as the major cause of stress for clients and because clients had financial difficulties, many social workers could not imagine that the client would have any energy to deal with climate change issues. This viewpoint was held by social workers who interpreted climate change work as meaning that clients show engagement in eco-activism. Some participants related economic difficulties to the current political situation in which social services are being diminished.

One *highly engaged* participant views financial difficulties as a major stress for her clients. Even so, she was able to tangentially connect climate change to economic issues, "Well, I guess I would say on the surface level, I'm not aware of [climate change] playing a major role in affecting anybody super-consciously right now. Climate-wise nobody talks to me [in my practice] about climate change." And later on she says, "People need jobs – so if we are expanding in concentric circles – the economics and the economy and oil production on a grand scale – the decline of the economy can't be separate from climate change. That is affecting the people I see as clients."

Another social worker who sees the economy as being a bigger problem for clients said, "The economy right now is very important to my clients. … All of them have been deeply affected not only by the stagnation in the economy, but also the rising prices, and things that are essential for them, food, bread …. And global warming is coming. It is insidious, and you can believe in it, and we all do. No, we don't all believe in it – I guess that 50% - but it's not here and now affecting lives in the same way that the economy is. And the lack of buying power in what used to be the middle class."

Another social worker who runs a group for twelve low-income women spoke about the way that being poor currently intersects with climate change in that the women in her group have fewer resources to adapt to higher heating bills and dealing with weather conditions. "I have been running for several years a woman's group … at our church … ten to twelve women all are low income. Some struggle with mental illness – and climate change is certainly affecting them in the winter and a lot of them don't have air conditioning in the summer. So these issues [of climate change] are discussed there. We sit down and talk with each other. It's a little community at this point." When asked if the dialog empowers the women in the group to make changes the

social worker responded, "No. They don't. We talk about this. I talk about what I've done. One volunteer talked about what she's done. But I think that they feel so beaten down by their financial situation or some by their mental illness – so I don't think that they feel empowered."

Day to day living is a challenge.

One social worker who sees clients in private practice said, "People I see are in desperate straits in terms of their emotional health whether it is anxiety or depression and the changes that are going on in climate change are way down on the bottom of their agendas. And if it is one more thing that they have to do, they are going to resist it … until they feel better." This social worker does not think that the changes that will come to her town will make life significantly more difficult for people "I think that primarily [clients] would think that they can save a little money on fuel" and later on discussing a family that is currently having financial difficulties with health insurance "[This family] has health insurance costs of $1800/month and they have no income – so climate change is not on their agenda. So whether it is warmer or colder – they don't have the money."

Similar comments were echoed by another participant, "Well I think that for many social workers, often our clients might have a big disconnect from climate change because often the reason that you are engaged with them [is that] they also have other life challenges that take time and energy So the whole issue of climate change might not be in their awareness or they don't have the capacity to do anything given what they currently have to face."

Multiple participants responded with frustration about the day-to-day work of social work. One highly engaged participant exclaimed, "How do you get beyond the crisis of the day to get to the larger issues?"

Another participant runs an anti-poverty agency that connects clients with services such as food stamps, health insurance, as well as providing a food pantry. At the beginning of the interview she only discussed the way that her agency works to help meet the economic needs of the clients: "There are so many other issues that we deal with here every single day and we can barely deal with those. We are just trying to get people out of poverty, trying to get people some money or a job. So we sometimes forget about those other things that are going on because we are just bombarded with so many programs at once. Our main focus is income maximization, so anything that has to do with bringing extra money into the house so that people can have the money available to do everything else that they need to do."

One retired social worker spoke about the pressure of helping clients meet day-to-day needs as well. She leads a committee at her church to increase their energy efficiency and reduce their carbon footprint, but even in an institution that has made a commitment to ecological responsibility, she finds that the work can be easily avoided, "It's not a top priority right now." She expressed frustration that her other church volunteer tasks, such as creating the programs for church concerts get prioritized, while energy efficiency projects get pushed aside. She said, "Things get in the way. The [workman] was going to come, but he couldn't come [and plug the vent that was causing heated air to escape]. Excuses, excuses, excuses. And I use them myself."

Problem is distant.

Although during the interview participants were asked about the local effects of climate change on clients, some social workers had difficulty imagining climate related problems occurring in their local setting and kept changing the conversation to imaginable effects of climate change in other countries, especially in developing nations. It is possible that the distancing of problems associated with climate change, either in time or place, was a defensive

response to dealing with personal anxiety over problems that might happen in the social workers' own homeland. One such example of this behavior was from a participant who was very concerned about climate change affecting the availability of food, when she said, " In Africa this is affecting people in other ways, if not more…. [and food prices are rising because of] the conflicts in other parts of the world."

Concerns for future generations.

Another reference to the effects of climate change at a distant time came up when many participants expressed concern about the effects of pollution on future generations, especially her grandchildren. She said, "[I'm concerned about things] such as the chemicals that we use, the gas that we use, the cars that we drive. Just anything that we contribute to the ozone layers and that we should be doing something more. So that even though we don't feel the effects of it now – we should be doing something about it because one of our generations will pay the price for it."

Another participant who works on community development advocates for including all members of the community. She believes that by educating children their parents can be motivated to live more sustainable lives. She said, "[Let everybody know] there is a place for you [in helping the environment]. You might not be the person who goes to the meeting – but you recycle and care about that. Anybody can do that. And of course the kids, giving the kids the tools to help the parents stop smoking, recycling building the next generation. That's my message to social workers."

Another participant who is deeply committed to climate activism sees climate change as a family issue. She said, "If you think about what is *the* issue, the thing that is most going to affect everybody - families and children, it is climate change, and to me everything else in a sense is

embedded in that. And so I think that for social workers it is really important to keep saying that."

Another social worker felt despondent about the state of the world and expressed concern for her grandchildren said, "Actually, I have very little hope. I feel very discouraged about [the future]. It makes me want to cry. But you know, I have grandchildren. A lot of grandkids and I look at their future and we just have to keep trying. But it makes me very depressed."

Participant Defined Action Paths

After the participant identified her concerns, she was asked what she would do to help her clients manage the identified concerns and what supports she would need in order to successfully help. Since social work is an action-oriented profession, asking social workers to imagine helping clients meet life challenges that could be induced by climate challenge, shows a range of practical social work that can be connected to climate change.

As discussed above, the range of concerns broadly fit into three categories: physical, mental health or other concerns. The actions social workers imagined taking fit into the following categories: educating clients/community either about health practices or sustainability practices; case management to for resource acquisition; sustainable community development; and emotional support. Table 2 compares the frequency of responses per category of actions in the *general sample* and the *highly engaged* sample.

Table 2

Actions that Social Workers can take to help Clients/Communities adapt to Climate Change

Action	*General Sample* (n = 6)	*Highly Engaged Sample* (n = 5)
Educate Clients/Community		
Health Practices	1	0
Sustainable living	1	1
Case Management	2	0
Sustainable Community Development	0	4
Emotional Support	0	1

Actions to take to help with physical concerns.

Educating clients/community about health and sustainability practices.

In order to help the urban elders adapt to the effects of increased summer heating, one social worker would continue to do the work that she already does. "I do some holistic health: around how to dress; drink a lot of water; stay indoors; [teach people how to] take care of themselves." She was also concerned about asthma in the elderly, "People open their windows and there are a lot of exhaust fumes which adds to all sort of respiratory difficulties such as asthma." This social worker appeared to be unaware of the fuel assistance programs available to people living with low incomes. When asked what supports she would need to help the landlord supply efficient heating systems she said, "I suppose that I would need support within the city, in terms of connection with environmental groups, that might do that. Additional resources. I don't really have the opportunity to do that – hiring outreach workers or community organizers – to have that happen more."

The social worker concerned about food accessibility told a story about bringing a group of homeless women to the local farmer's market. Shopping at the farmer's market was a different

experience for these women than going to a supermarket or a food pantry and she was disappointed that the farmer's market staff did not appear to appreciate how out of place her clients felt. She hoped that the staff could "try to make the farmer's market more appealing to people. I mean really getting people excited about it. A few people went – but then it fizzled out." She went on to explain that most customers at the farmer's market pay with cash, but her clients used food stamps, which requires the farmer to use a DBT machine, "It was a longer process, and when they had a line of people at their table to buy produce or whatever, and they had to deal with punching this number and then having to get a receipt …. I think that [the homeless women] kind of felt self-conscious … they felt like people were being rude to them … so they weren't as apt to want to go back and experience it again." When asked about what support she would need to make a positive farmer's market experience for these women she said that she would need more support from her agency and from the farmer's market community liaison. "What we would actually need is to set up a more inviting first time for people – [is support from the liaison] and support of my agency too, to make this a regular [event]. Maybe we could go weekly … instead of just one time." Buying locally grown food is a seen as a way to reduce a family's carbon footprint. Her town had created a policy to help people who are on food stamps use the farmer's market by the DBT machine, and also they allowed food stamps to be worth double the face value when used at the farmer's market. But the system was not being fully implemented by this group of homeless women because the women were not helped to cross the social and educational barrier to make shopping at the farmer's market work.

Energy efficiency was a major concern for three of the eleven social workers. Two of the highly engaged participants, both of whom are retired, volunteer at their churches. One heads the energy efficiency committee where she "helps raise awareness" and brings in experts to make

suggestions on how the church can lower its carbon footprint. One of the actions that she has taken is to invite the group called "Interfaith Power and Lighting" to her church to conduct an energy audit. When asked what supports she needs to continue the energy efficiency work at her church she replied "I would have to reconvene a committee which sort of came apart" and she explained that "The problem is that there are so many other things going on in the church… People are very busy". She believes that "[The community] is on board but they need leadership." She said that she was meeting with a church administrator later that week and she would discuss moving forward with the energy efficiency plan with the administrator.

Another retired social worker said that her church is an environmentally active community so she does not have to be the sole motivator behind her church's energy efficiency project. She reports, "Everyone [in the church community] is concerned and people are doing what they can…. The project that we are embarking on is called 'smart growth' which of course is about being environmentally sensitive … So we have a lot of people in our church community – architects, landscape architects, who are very much involved in this project and who are very concerned about it. So it is a very informed community." When asked what further supports she would like to see, from whom, to make the difference that she really wants to make, she looks beyond her church community to the world at large. "I guess more real interest among people. I have tried to get people to various climate change conferences or demonstrations."

Another highly engaged social worker did not see a way to connect climate change to her private social work practice with families that have issues with domestic violence. But she also holds an administrative position where she works internationally on policy issues related to pollution and in this setting she works on environmental awareness and action in the workplace. "In my agency I have been involved in helping develop green practice protocols on some minor

things, well major things, but even in minor things it has been interesting. I don't see the average social worker making it a priority or even feeling that it makes a difference. Even little things, like constantly, you might be a person who buys bottled water every day for your lunch. There's no connection there – on how that might impact the environment." When asked what support she would need to successfully implement a green protocol she replied, "A critical mass of people" would be important because "If there were some individuals who pressured the agency and administration to say that this is really important, the way that it is important to provide good services to clients, it is important, when you make decisions, to take into account the environment." She described the need for individuals to pressure the leaders to implement pro-environmental policy.

Case management to obtain resources.

Another social worker was concerned about water scarcity due to changes in climate. She would use case management to help clients deal with this challenge. She said, "I would gather information for myself. I would refer that person to an agency that was useful." She described the support that she required to complete such tasks as, "Readiness of any agency that I was going to refer them to. Hoping that they weren't overrun and unable to deliver the services. But I would actually provide phone numbers. It could be that I would take that person to that place."

Multiple participants were concerned their clients might not have sufficient access to fuel for home heating. This was of special concern for social workers who work with the urban elder population. One social worker directs an agency that implements a national fuel assistance plan to people who live at low-income levels. Prior to this interview she considered fuel assistance to be a way to help people with "income maximization" but during the interview for this study she made the connection that when fuel is used more economically less greenhouse gases are emitted

into the atmosphere. She spoke about how the electric company in her town is helping teach people to conserve energy, "[The energy company representatives] come into your house. They look at everything, they give you energy efficient bulbs." Later in the interview she spoke of possible ways to extend this program, "There should be a show of little tricks how you can make your home more efficient. What would you call it 'home remedies'? Home remedies to weatherize your home on your own – you don't have to spend all of this crazy money."

Sustainable community development.

Another highly engaged, energetic, and creative social worker who already represents her municipality at international climate change conferences would like to extend her work to include university-municipality collaborations. She said, "Well I want to organize a protocol for university communities so that all universities work together – city and universities and have a model code that they follow involving students and municipal projects. Having high standards for facilities operations, sharing research and possibly working on carbon offset projects together. This involves both the universities and maybe even funding for local municipal projects, for example to weatherize residences or to install solar panels." This dynamic thinker believes that students "drive the values on the university campuses, so that makes an automatic platform. Plus the opportunity to work with the young people and to give them the opportunity to give them more and more." When asked what kind of support would be needed to accomplish such a task she mentioned bringing her model to a group called the International Sustainable Campus Network.

Emotional support.

A highly engaged social worker who has been committed to decades of political activism and community building, would like to continue using the skills and experiences that she has

already developed to continue to support change through empathic listening. She finds that many activists, who are not social workers, express frustration when the public does not agree with their viewpoint. Instead she would like to "Do more of the feeling, sharing stuff. It's kind of like when you're a therapist and somebody says, 'how can you sit there with someone who abuses their kid and does terrible things. Well, it's because I've gotten to know them I see the feelings that they have and what they've been through. It's kind of like – the more that you know somebody, the better you feel about them." The "feeling and sharing" work that she refers to is based on practices created by eco-activist, Joanna Macy (Macy, 1998). Macy's experiential exercises allow workshop participants to experience their feelings about the environment. In her role as a community developer for a municipality, she envisions the possibility of organizing "workshops, effective facilitation, and effective group management. To [teach citizens to] speak up, to really encouraging more nurturing kinds of groups." When asked what kind of support she would need to successfully carry out such work, she replied, "Honestly, the most important thing is having a little group of people who really want to do that sort of [work] so that you don't feel that you are out there by yourself – some sort of crank. For me, that would be the most single important support." She would enjoy support from the social workers trained in collaborative methodologies. "And if there was a little group of social workers, or whatever, who were interested in bringing these skills to the communities."

Another social worker wanted to encourage people in urban neighborhoods to be more helpful to each other on a regular basis so that they would extend caring to the community if a disaster occurred. She discussed how in a recent snowstorm people on her street had "saved" the spot they had shoveled out, rather than acting more collaboratively and extending help to neighbors by shoveling extra spaces. "I feel that there are two ways to go. … How a

neighborhood or community [creates] norms and expectations [of helping each other] will really matter."

Participants who could not envision any actions for social workers to take.

Two social workers were not able to envision any helpful social work actions. One participant expressed deep concerns about environmental collapse. She seemed very anxious speaking about the environment and could not relate the topic to her private practice work. She continually veered the conversation away from the questions that I was asking and seemed to calm herself down by talking about an advocacy project that she supports to save a specific wild animal. This social worker spoke about how she feels stress from being a "consumer of the news media". She does not engage in eco-activism other than taking personal responsibility by lowering the thermostat in her home, recycling, and refraining from using bottled water so that she can avoid using energy to transport her water and the energy in water bottle packaging.

Another social worker does not believe that social workers need to take any actions because dealing with climate change is the government's responsibility. And "if enough people clamor about it" changes will happen. She thinks that job creation is more important.

Participant Defined Supports Necessary to take Action

The categories of support that the participants said that they would need to successfully take an action to help their clients/community meet the challenges of climate change were: leadership, community support, and structural support. Table 3 lists the number of references to these categories in the *general sample* and the *highly engaged sample.*

Table 3

Categories of support

Support	*General Sample* (n = 6)	*Highly Engaged Sample* (n = 5)
Leadership	1	2
Structural support	3	0
Community Support	0	2
Critical Mass	0	2

Leadership.

The participant of the general sample who brought homeless women to the farmer's market was frustrated that the leadership at her agency did not give priority to the project of bringing homeless women to the farmer's market. She thought that if success of this project had been of importance to the director of the program and more planning had gone into implementing it, then the women might have been able to shift their buying habits to include the farmer's market which could have improved their diet and helped the local agriculture.

Two participants of the highly engaged sample were frustrated with the lack of leadership with regards to prioritization of sustainability practices at their agency or church. They believed that the efforts that they currently do towards implementing green protocols would be more successful if management were supporting their efforts.

Critical mass.

Similar to the frustration at lack of leadership, two of the highly engaged participants were upset that there was a lack of like "like minded" peers who would engage in sustainable practices.

Structural.

Three of the general sample said that they would need structural support in order to help their clients. The concerns of these participants involved supplying resources and education to their clients/community, such as fuel assistance, drinking water, and healthy living education.

Can Participants Connect Social Work Practice to Climate Change Adaptation?

This study asked if social workers were able to see issues related to climate change as being within the scope of social work practice. Even though most of the participants of this study did not see a connection between climate change and their current practice, during the interviews, nine out of eleven of the participants were able to imagine a climate related challenge that could affect their clients. Some social workers thought that the responsibility to address climate changes should be implemented through governmental policy. Others, although they are concerned about climate change, thought of "climate change work" as engaging in political activism and did not think that it is appropriate work to carry out in a clinical setting. Most of the participants, who currently participate in ecological work, do so outside of their professional employment, either in their church, or through membership in environmental groups.

Areas in which participants were able to connect.

One social worker who works for a municipal government on transportation and energy said, "I encourage people to create fewer greenhouse gas emissions. And I think that my role in all of that is much more in terms of community process and the persuasion side of things than in the technical side of things. And I think that come from my social work background, so it is kind of advocacy and persuasion with people and institutions and trying to create ways to make it easier." She later says that she uses her social work skills when speaking about climate change,

"I think …. social workers develop listening skills and that is really powerful and not always prevalent on our daily lives."

One participant who is highly engaged in community development says,"[Community building] is fun. There is a lot that you can do. So that keeps me going. I like that there is potential to do positive change and on a personal level it has been very exciting for me – because I have had the opportunity to go from the local level to where ever [the work] is. Professionally it has been very gratifying and there is more to do." Even though she is involved and generally positive she is highly concerned, "I would feel a little bit more optimistic if I hadn't heard the statement … These weather events really are due to climate change – bad stuff!"

One participant who previously engaged in protesting the buildup of nuclear weapons is encouraged by the actions that her state is currently taking towards environmental protection. She continues to encourage citizens to be politically active. "[I] encourage other people to lobby. And right now in [this state] there is a real opening in terms of climate action, a real willingness on the part of the state administration to do stuff and they have done stuff. I spend a lot of time talking to people about the importance of calling a state representative and saying: 'I think that this is really important'."

Unnamed connections.

Initially in the interview with the social worker who runs the anti-poverty agency, she was unable to see any connection between the work that her agency does and climate change. During the conversation she made a connection between the fuel assistance/weatherization program and climate change, "You know another thing that I just thought about that has to do directly with what we do at this agency is the whole idea of the weatherization program. That is one of our major programs, and fuel assistance. And we do appliance repairs. We are working

directly with the clients. If we tell them – they give you a boiler, like when people have [appliances] that are not energy efficient, then we start advocating with downtown to replace their boiler, refrigerator, or stoves, so that they can have more cost effective bills. They can have something that is actually good for the environment, so that is the energy and weatherization program." She went on to explain how her agency had helped a landlord buy a new, energy efficient boiler because her client's energy bill too high. Her agency implements LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) which is a federally funded program to help low income families afford heating and cooling costs. This program encourages home energy efficiency, through funding weatherization of homes. It does not pay for appliance repairs, landlords are responsible for funding repairs, but it does pay for replacing inefficient appliances if a renter qualifies for the fuel assistance program.

One social worker kept referring to other people and organizations that should take action; even while she was specifically being asked what actions she could envision taking. When referring to actions that she could haven taken, instead she externalized the solution to policy changes that others can implement, "I guess that people are working on [climate change], but a policy change, in terms of helping or increasing the amount of food stamps, kind of like a cost of living increase, an adjustment based on the price of food, grains, the price of things. Maybe increasing or changing the formula that determines … the amount that people get for food stamps in order to take into account the higher prices of everything, so maybe some policy around that."

Barriers to connections.

Some of the barriers to being able to connect social work practice to climate change adaptation included: a lack of a practice model, education and professional support; the

immensity of the perceived causes of climate change and the potential problem; and the philosophical belief that climate change adaptation does not belong within the scope of social work practice.

Lack of practice model, education or professional support.

One participant who does see a role for social work in promoting an environmental agenda is frustrated in her perception that both NASW and her peers at work lack commitment to take environmentally responsible actions. She bemoans "How little the professional organization NASW has been involved. There's really no environmental committee, either at the national office or the state office. Even in my own work setting, I'm often surprised how, for professional people, how little they are involved with what they could do. So I've been attempting at my agency. I have been involved in helping develop green practice protocol on some minor things … I don't see the average social worker making it a priority."

A highly engaged participant would like to see the field of social work more engaged in issues surrounding climate change. She believes that social work does not always focus on the root cause of problems and said, "Social work has been criticized in the past because they have been treating symptoms instead of causes."

Climate change adaptation feels overwhelmingly big.

A highly engaged social worker who just returned from a trip to India commented on how the American economy is consumption based, "The whole economy is based on getting people to buy things to keep itself going… The structure requires [the capitalistic system] to keep on going, otherwise the structure is going to collapse." She goes on to say that the cycle of an economic system that is based on excessive consumption is "preventing the change from taking place. If people weren't so scared they would probably make changes more readily."

Many participants spoke about being afraid of potential ecological disturbances. One participant was asked if she "push[es] away" thoughts about climate change. She replied, "It's more that I don't know what to do. So I take a more political view. I make sure that I vote. I can recycle as much as I want, but all of those things don't make that much difference because you need to have international agreements with many countries. So with me it always goes back to the political process…. I just think in terms of supporting organizations or candidates for people to represent me in congress."

Does not believe that climate change adaption should be in the scope of practice.

Another social worker who views climate change work as activism said, "I think that social work is with the people who are suffering. I think there is always a political arm and I think the [climate change work] will be active in that area. But I don't think that is our primary mandate." This is an example of a clinician who sees climate change work as policy work and not of concern in the clinical setting. She said that environmental degradation "affect[s] me deeply personally – but not professionally." She went on to discuss how some of her immediate family members had survived serious medical injuries because her family had, unbeknownst to them, lived near a toxic waste site.

Eco-Activism participants engage in outside of their professional life.

Five of the social workers engage in climate change activities outside of their "jobs", either because they are retired and working in their community or because most ecological activism is "extra-curricular." Three participants said that their engagement with activism began during nuclear arms buildup or anti-war protests in the 80's and they now engage in environmental activism. One participant said, "First I really engaged during the cold war when there was a whole nuclear arsenal [build up. Talk of] mutually insured destruction was at its

height. Being a parent and being a social worker, and working with families, [I was struck] by how concerned these families were about things like – did their kids brush their teeth? And here was this thing hanging over us that people were just blocking out." She later discusses the relationship between politics and economics, "We could create all of these jobs if we invest in renewables … you know, for our overall economy it makes total sense. But there are some huge important, in the sense of multinational corporations, who see themselves as being hurt and they are going to fight tooth and nail, and they do. And because money is such a key part of our political system, it is tied right into that and it is a very huge part of our cultural system. We are based on consumption, based on advertizing and we are a very passive culture. So, yes, even if [renewable energy] is better for most people, this is what we get."

This participant further described her influences in the field of ecopsychology. She was careful to describe that her activism is separate from her profession, "But those [activities are not work- [they are] outside of work." She then goes on to describe how she got involved in her activism while protesting the nuclear arms build up, "I encountered Joanna Macy, and her work, and it was such a revelation to me that there was a way to really, not only think about [these large problems], but also feel those feelings so that it was not totally immobilizing. … those opportunities to share how we were feeling about things kept us going [as activists]… and I think that it was both the combination of sharing deep connections and [doing actions] that gave us a basic trust in each other and that was very important…. Later on I had the opportunity to take [an] ecopsychology class."

Perceptions of Fairness in Climate Change Adaptation

When asked about climate justice, one social worker who is very concerned about food availability around the world said, "It is an injustice to [people in underdeveloped countries] that

we in a developed country have aisles and aisles of groceries in the food store. We have all this food here … [but] we don't see it in action, as they do, when all their crops get wiped out and there goes their food source for the year."

Another participant who is very concerned about pollution in general and works both in the US and abroad, reflected on the fact that everybody experiences the same weather, but that poor people have less ability to be resilient to any negative effects. "Well, in terms of the clients, they are affected I think the way that most people are affected, because you breathe the same air and drink the same water, but they have less resources to buffer the climate change. So, for example, [they might not] have the capacity to ameliorate some of it in [their] life."

One participant referred to the fact that most eco-activists are middle-class, "Maybe it's fair that it's divided out amongst the people who have time to deal with those issues and not expect those who have more immediate concerns around poverty and health – those who can take time out." She also encourages social workers to stay aware of how climate change policy might affect vulnerable populations. After a meeting with the local energy company about who will pay for the cost of implementing clean energy infrastructure she said, "[the energy company] might allow costs to be passed off onto people who might not be able to afford the cost. So we're working with economic issues and social workers can keep an eye on the shift in energy cost and how that impacts people."

Some comments by the participants were about distant countries as well as about a future time. "Well the way that I think about this is in the biggest sense - here we are the rich Americans and we're trashing the planet for everybody. And so there are all these billions, literally, of people who are suffering. Some of them are going to suffer a lot more than us because they have fewer resources. I think of the people in Bangladesh, desertification. All of

those worldwide issues are just huge. So that is the big picture thing that I think about. I also think about, projecting into the future, well if it gets a lot hotter, say. Well typically it's not the people with money who suffer from that, it's poor people and people with more crowded conditions."

Another participant spoke about how urban elders have a higher rate of asthma than the general population but she did not make a connection between respiratory issues and climate change. She said, "I don't think that the [urban elders] have issues of climate justice. They do worry about their health."

A social worker who works directly with the urban poor remarked on the injustice of poverty, "The word that comes to me is 'that's not fair'. Why are these people not getting what other people are getting? Why is the information lacking? Why are the resources lacking? Why are people dong things that ruin the environment where these people live?"

One participant who works in private practice and sees people in the middle income bracket does not see any disparities in the way that her clients would be affected by climate change. She says, "I think that because I have a private practice, I have not witnessed [climate injustice] first hand. I'm not working with a population that is dealing with poverty."

One highly engaged social worker who works with her church community was the only person interviewed who discussed giving a voice and representation to the people from low-income communities. "Our church is involved with an interfaith group. I bring that up because this is a collaboration with a lot of churches, synagogues, mosques and social justice groups, a lot from low-income areas." She goes on to say that this interfaith group uses Saul Alinsky's model of community organizing, which is based on extensive networking between communities to create the groundwork for a moment. "And this works because you get thousands of people

together from all of these communities and then after you've done all of this groundwork, then you invite the governor or the senators, or the key political people … And because of the power of a lot of people, changes are made." She has experienced this type of social activism around issues of health care and racism in nursing homes but has not seen this applied to climate change yet. She thinks that this is a powerful model of "organizing around social justice issues" and "churches have a major role to play".

Workers' Sense of Hope, Empowerment, and Resiliency

Participant's sense of hopefulness ranged from attitudes that climate change is a solvable problem to those who are fearful that ecological collapse is likely to occur. But participants in the highly engaged group usually had support through their work with others on climate change activities. This sense of community spirit seemed to have a positive effect on their resiliency and keeps them empowered to act. Even so, the more highly engaged participants tended to express feelings of anger, sadness and to be fearful that major catastrophe.

One participant who is very involved in eco-activism and maintains an extremely upbeat attitude demonstrated the distancing that even aware and involved people take towards climate change. Near the end of the interview, when asked, "what else are you worried about" she replied, "Some personal and family issues bother me more than the mega issues." She keeps herself forward looking and said, "I think that the kids are the most hopeful thing in climate [work] – 20% of the kids at MIT are studying energy issues. That's huge!"

Another highly engaged participant describes the complexity of her sense of hopefulness and resiliency. She replied, "I am all over the map. Basically I am a pessimist by nature and always have been. So basically I think that we are screwed and that things are going to be terrible and I feel really sad about that. At the same time we just don't know and for sure we're doomed if

we don't take action. I think that there are ways in which certain things may well survive better than we think now, but definitely it's a collapse of human civilization and we've had those before, the fall of Rome, the Mayans, but this time it's world-wide pretty much because of the change of the climate. So I don't know. I'm not real hopeful – at the same time, I'm not giving up." She justifies her efforts in that maybe her work will have the ability to mitigate problems that might occur without her efforts, "Well, I'm not giving up our ability not to turn it around – but make it better than it might otherwise be. And there is just the possibility that we can create something better for human beings." And when asked if she will keep up her eco-activism work she replied, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think it's a way to feel more hopeful… I think that the feeling of being helpless is a tough one. And if you are doing something then you don't feel helpless. I think that our culture creates a lot of helplessness – damn it!" She then went on to say that she imagines that the current economic pressures on people will have the effect of silencing people who may otherwise have spoken out because, "Now with all of the unemployment, who is going to rock the boat at work. You are just grateful to have a job … and there is a lot of shame and guilt if you can't take care of your family."

One social worker who does not see climate change as a very big problem was very hopeful about solving it, "Oh, I think that that we can [solve climate change problems], absolutely. I think that if there is enough noise and enough concern about it. And when there is concern then there is always action. I just don't see that our profession is that primary leader of the action." Even though this participant describes her family as being environmentally active, driving hybrid cars, consuming locally grown food, raising chickens, she was the only one who would not name a concern that she had for her clients with respect to climate change adaptation.

Another participant viewed climate change as a solvable problem. When asked how hopeful she is that her elder clients can make changes, she replied, "I think pretty [hopeful]. People tend to pay attention. People are pretty concerned about their health and take steps. Depending on smoking – environmental smoke – people are pretty responsive to that. People are home a lot during the day and they watch a lot of TV and they tend to be more informed than those of us who are out and don't watch those late afternoon TV shows. It's pretty interesting how informed people are."

One social worker who feels overwhelmed by the possibility of environmental problems reports that she limits her input from news media, "Personally I don't feel good about [limiting my exposure to the news]. But I can't bear to take too much of it in. It's too depressing…. It's scary and so depressing….Yes it's terrifying." And then she changed the topic and began to talk about how she funds a specific animal protection project.

Another highly engaged social worker described her feelings of despair, "Because when I look at it and I look at all the recalcitrance of our political people in power, I do despair. I have to say, I wonder if we are doomed. I mean the scientists are saying that it is too late."

The social worker who runs the anti-poverty agency tells what motivates her to do social work, "Everyday I am always motivated. I am seeing people change. I am seeing that we are actually opening up doors for people. I am seeing staff being developed. To me it is not only the clients that we are actually opening up doors for, [also] I am seeing staff being developed. To me it is not only the clients getting somewhere, but because the agency attracts a lot of entry-level staff, because it's human services, we don't pay a lot of money – a lot of our staff can also be clients. They are a paycheck away form being a client….We are teaching clients how to do [things] for themselves….and we are doing new programs all of the time."

Recommendations for Future Eco-Social Work

When asked, hypothetically, what recommendations one participant would make to an NASW environmental committee, one participants spontaneously created a four-point plan, "Some principles that should be adopted: the [social service] agency should 'do no harm' through to the environment; nurture students who are interested in environmental issues, in particular community activism around environmental activism; recognition for people in the field who are forging a path; and better understanding of environmental impacts on vulnerable populations."

Another highly engaged social worker would like to see an increase in climate change awareness among social workers. She said, "I think that we [that is, social workers,] have a responsibility. Individually, to be leaders, to be models, to talk about what we are doing. And that is very important. And as I said in different ways, as social workers we can be models for what we are trying to get across. We can work politically, with ourselves and as organizations. I wish NASW took a stronger role in all of this." She is a proponent of empowerment through action. "But to get people to feel empowered in some way, I've done small workshops at an agency … I try to get them to understand that you can do little things … to feel some sense of control and empowered to do something."

A few participants would like to see social workers model pro-environmental behaviors both in their professional and private lives. One said, "As I mentioned, I would like to see the professional organization be more involved in this or encourage people as an organization to look at their practices in human service settings. Just because you're not doing – quote – a certain type of environmental work. It is interesting to see how this is totally off of the radar screen for them." She also hopes that social workers will speak up about the excessive consumerism and its effects on both social and community health. "So I guess that I see a role for social workers, not

only to ameliorate the problems of negative climate change, but possibly helping [people] to see that with [pro-environmental] practices, you can live your life pretty happily… And to help people get satisfaction out of a different lifestyle."

Another highly engaged participant encourages social workers and said, "I think that they should totally engage." She recommended, "As a profession they should be out there saying, we think that [climate change] is a threat to families. And they should just keep saying that. And [telling the public that] we've got to deal with this."

One of the participants who works towards community development would like the environmental movement be more inclusive. She would like "That judgmental [attitude] to go." She would like to see social workers use community gardens as a forum for social and environmental justice. "Maybe that is the job of social workers, to make a place for everybody in the environmental movement. It's a very big community organizing lesson ….. in [a specific] community garden the big message was 'everybody is part of the garden.' Everybody is recycling. Everybody is composting. Just like if makes a sense of connecting through positive feelings about yourself – not in a negative way. And there is a place for you – you may not be the person who goes to the meeting – but I do my recycling – I really care about that. So anybody can do that.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Expectation of findings

Going into this study, I expected to find that most social workers who passed the inclusion criteria for this study were able to identify a concern that they had for their clients/community regarding climate change adaptation. The collective narrative describing actions that social workers might perform created a sketch of what *practical eco-social work practices* could look like.

Consistent with other studies, I was able to locate a sample of social workers who were concerned about the environment but were unaware that NASW has an environmental statement (Shaw, 2006). As well, I expected and found that the priorities of most clinicians in the field involved categories such as: helping the homeless; domestic violence; and direct mental health services.

Another expected finding was that, in general professional life, participants lacked: a clinical practice model that integrates mental health and climate change; a working model to support climate justice; and commitment to including the natural world in the person-in-environment frame.

My own bias towards the need for a social work viewpoint in climate change work undoubtedly affected the findings. At the end of one interview, one social worker said that she thought that I was implying that all affects of climate change would be negative. She disagreed

with such an assumption because she believes that the major cause of human induced climate change is excessive consumption, which has increased material dependency and social isolation. Although she is concerned that future climate change adaptation may be physically hard for vulnerable populations, she believes that "the entire lifestyle has to change". She said, "I see a role for social workers not only to ameliorate the negative problems of climate change, but possibly helping people see that they can live their lives pretty happily without some of these [material goods]."Hopefully this study will contribute to an understanding of the barriers to increased connection between social work and climate change adaptation; encourage others to study the connection between mental health and climate change as outlined by the American Psychological Association (Swim, 2009); create eco-social work practices; encourage social workers to join many of the other disciplines that are currently organizing and planning for climate change adaptation in order to make certain that their plans include the social service needs of underrepresented citizens.

Observations

In this section, I will draw conclusion between theoretical concepts and empirical findings of previous literature to the result of this study. Emphasis will be placed on: practice models, just practices, and the natural world. A general finding of this study that was consistent with Shaw's (2011) report was the fact that a low percentage (11%) of social workers were aware that NASW has an environmental policy. Also, just as Shaw (2006) and Marlow (2001) found, social workers who were interested in implementing the NASW environmental policy encountered obstacles. One highly engaged participant, for example, reported that she had not been successful at engaging her local NASW chapter to consider ecological issues in social work practice.

Practice models.

Social work is a complex field because it considers the effects of actions on many levels from the individual - to the collective – to the environmental. The person-in-environment model holds a dynamic tension between meeting the needs of the individual and the collective. In this study, the practitioners who work at the macro level were able to combine ecological activism with social work practice on a collective level by working with their community or through policy change. The actions that took included: making cities more walkable; organizing community gardens; weatherizing buildings for energy efficiency; increasing public dialog about climate change; and working on sustainability studies with municipalities. The highly engaged sample said that the support that they need is for more members of the communities and agencies to join their sustainable practices . They would like support to come from leaders, peers, and citizens because they are concerned that the physical difficulties that can arise from climate change will be drastic, such as extreme flooding and storms to changes in agricultural patterns.

A different experience was reported by the clinical social workers who work on the individual or family level. Currently members of this group do not have practice models that include environmental issues. The majority of the clinical practitioners see economic hardships as a more relevant issue for their clients than climate change, because they see economic problems in the present and believe that climate change problems will occur in the future. The more pressing needs they see on a daily basis include: mental health concerns; shelter; food; and mobility. In general, they were unaware of clinical theories that include the psychological implications of climate change, such as ecopsychology, ecotherapy, and environmental psychology. The climate change concerns that the individual clinicians could imagine that their clients might someday face were lack of resources and difficult weather events. The actions that

they would need to take to help clients with these problems were either to help allocate resources or teach how to adjust to deferent temperatures. These clinicians reported that they would need structural supports, such as referring agencies that would supply materials or information, in order to successfully their clients deal with these concerns.

In general, both groups in this study mentioned physical concerns such as extreme weather events or food scarcity. Rarely were psychological issues such as anxiety or despair about the environment discussed, even though many of the participants mentioned that they themselves experience stress, fear and anger about the state of the environment. It is possible that participant's personal feelings affect their ability to help their clients with similar feelings. The results of this study were similar to Shaw (2006) and Marlow (2001) that show self-reported level of despair can influence successfully implementation of an eco-social work agenda.

Just practice.

Most of the participants in this study viewed the issues concerning climate justice to be about the lack of fairness in access to world resources as well as their impressions that wealthier people have benefited from the use of resources and that poor people and people of color have been exposed to higher degrees of pollution. None of the participants addressed lack of representation in the decision making process as fundamental to the issue of justice (Bali, 2002). In this study, it is mostly likely that the lack of cultural diversity in the sample affected the range of responses. Also the interview instrument emphasized the concerns, practice and action that the social worker would take for their clients and the concept of fairness was not probed as deeply as these other ideas, which could be a reason that conversations about climate justice were not as well developed.

The natural world in PIE.

As discussed in the literature review, the environment in PIE can refer to the natural or social environment. By focusing these interviews on climate change, it was clear that the word environment referred to the natural environment in these interviews. Most likely, because the natural environment is so rarely considered in social work, most of the general sample did not have a theoretical frame to relate the natural world to social work practice. One participant from the general sample was an exception. The description of her philosophy was based on conceptualizing her clients living in an interconnected community with all beings on the earth. The highly engaged participants did consider their communities natural environment and how both people affect the environment and the environment can also be a healing factor for the community, such as common green spaces and community gardens.

Recommendations for Future Research

This particular study could be enhanced by a triangulation of other stakeholders. Members of these other planning agencies could be polled to see how they could imagine that social workers could inform their plans. Participatory action research could lead empower communities to make changes that will help them prepare for climate change. And clients and communities could be asked what concerns do they have about the environment? And how would they like the social work profession to take any action to help them meet their concerns.

Further research could be designed to study ways to increase social worker engagement with climate change; to test interventions and look for best practices for increasing ecological awareness as being in the scope of social work practices; and to study social workers. For example, a study could be designed to measure whether educating social workers about mental health affects of climate change changed could help increase awareness. Or participatory

research could be designed for social workers to implement green practices at work and strive to be role models for sustainable living. And most importantly, future research on practical eco-social work needs to be more culturally representative of both the social work profession and the populations that they serve.

Implications for Social Work Practice

I argue that as a profession, social work has a unique set of core values and guiding principles based on using collaborative practices to aid vulnerable and disenfranchised populations (NASW Ethics, 2008). As demonstrated by the small quantity of articles, research, (Molyneux, 2010) and knowledge base of NASW members (Shaw, 2006), the social work profession is not currently engaging in broad dialog, research, or practices on their responsibility to address climate change adaptation on behalf of vulnerable and disenfranchised populations. Many other professions and sectors of society are currently engaged in planning for climate change adaptation from city planners, public heath departments, to grassroots groups. But the guiding principles of these organizations often differ from the guiding principles of the social work profession. Specifically these organizations do not always consider the needs of underrepresented populations.

Revisiting and deeply engaging with the effects of the natural environment in PIE can help social work live up to the moral imperative defined in its environmental policy statement. Removing the false dichotomy between economic and environmental needs for vulnerable populations can increase commitment to eco-activism such as was the case for the participant who run an antipoverty agency when she realized that offering access to materials and methods for home weatherization helped her community save money and reduce energy consumption. Learning about the mental health effects related to climate change and using a model of the

"sustainable self" (Doherty, 2006) can increase an ecologically informed clinical practice model. Working for a just model of climate change adaptation can bring awareness to ethical tensions in current planning models and social workers can insist on representation of all community members in the decision making process of climate adaptation plans.

Climate change adaptation remains unrelated to social work practice when its affects on vulnerable populations and its relationship to a just society remain unnamed and uninvestigated. But when the social work tools of: critical discourse analysis; collaborative practices; reflective listening; advocating for ethical use of world resources; assessment and treatment of the psychological needs; and continuing to ask tough questions – the social work profession can effectively advocate for the needs of clients and communities as they adapt to the challenges induced by our changing climate.

The lived experiences of the women who participated in this study showed that their deep concerns for environmental issues was often accompanied with difficult affect such as fear, despair or anger. I recommend that projects that focus on ecological issues take into account the self-care that is required for individuals involved in this work.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Review Committee Letter

SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

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Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

December 7, 2010

Abigail Tischler

Dear Abigail,

Your revised materials have been reviewed. You have done an excellent job with their amendment. The literature review clarifies and supports your purpose and the entire study is clearer and more focused. We are glad to give our final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. I was particularly interested in your reference to Germain's work. She definitely included the natural environment in "person in situation" and called her perspective "ecological". You are right that the environment was increasingly limited to the "social; environment". I'm afraid that I contributed to that trend (example: with the ecomap).

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jennifer Perloff, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Participant Informed Consent

October 9, 2010

Dear Participant-

My name is Abigail Tischler and I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work, in Northampton, MA. Currently, I am conducting a research study to explore how as a social worker, your views on climate change adaptation intersect with your social work practice and what potential climate justice issues may affect the clients and/or community that you work with. The results of this study will be used for my master's thesis, as well as possible publications and presentations.

The requirements to participate in this study are that:

1. You hold a social work degree (bachelors, masters or doctoral).
2. You believe that human activity is a cause of global climate change.
3. You currently engage in *some* type of pro-environmental action, this could include: recycling; working for environmental justice; using public transportation.

Participation in this study involves taking part in a one-hour audio taped interview. During this interview I will ask you about ways in which you do, or would like to, include issues concerning climate change adaptation in your social work practice. The interview will be conducted in-person, over the phone, or via computer connection using Skype or iChat. In-person interviews will be conducted in a public place or in a professional setting. I will ask for permission to contact you for a 15-minute clarifying phone call within three weeks of the interview. I will transcribe the taped interview.

Possible risks of participating in this study include emotional distress or discomfort due to talking about environmental degradation. Possible benefits of participating in this study include feeling empowered by participating in research that has the potential to increase social workers participation in future climate change action steps. No compensation will be provided for participation in this study.

To safeguard identifiable information, a code number will be used to identify the transcript of your interview. The paperwork that connects your name to the code number, as well as this signed Informed Consent form will be stored in a locked safe deposit box. If the interview is conducted in a public space, it is possible that other people might see you being interviewed or overhear some of your answers. If the interview is being conducted via phone or Internet connection, it is possible that another person will over hear your conversation. I will transcribe the taped audio recording. Any brief quotes or vignettes from your transcription that are used in a publication or presentation will be disguised to protect confidentiality. All data (notes, tapes,

transcriptions etc.) will be stored in a lock file cabinet for three years, as required by Federal guidelines. If I need the information for longer than three years, it will continue to be stored in a locked cabinet and I will destroy the data when it is no longer needed.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw partial answers or the complete interview. You may refuse to answer any question that is asked during the interview. You may withdraw your data from the study within three weeks of completing the interview. I may be reached by e-mail (xxx@yyy) or by phone (xxx-yyy-zzzz) if you have any questions or would like to withdraw from the study. If you have any concerns about your rights, or any aspect of this study, I encourage you to call the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant	**Date**	
Researcher	**Date**	

Appendix C

Interview Guide

1) What does climate change adaptation mean to you?

(C*limate change adaptation* is the ability to respond to changing human service needs that are projected to arise due to variability in global weather patterns. It is projected that there will be: less access to food; increases in extreme weather; hotter conditions; and increased flooding.)

2) What actions, on a personal or professional level, do you currently take in order to help the environment or to prepare for a changing climate?
3) In what ways do you imagine that a changing climate could affect your community or clients?
4) What actions would you like to take, as a professional social worker, towards helping your clients or the community adapt to the changes that concern you about our warming climate?
5) What support would you need in order to take such actions?
6) Are you familiar with the term *climate justice?* What does *climate justice* mean to you?
7) How would you imagine that *climate justice* issues affect your clients and/or community?
8) Is there a person, event, or philosophy that has influenced your views on climate protection? In what way?
9) Is there anything that you wished I had asked in this interview?

10) After I review the transcription of this interview, may I call you and ask to clarify some responses. I will only call if I cannot understand a word or phrase from the audio taped recording.